

TAPAS GUHA : A PROFILE



— DIPAVALI DEBROY

— ILLUSTRATOR TAPAS GUHA

Tapas Guha was illustrating a comic strip for *The Indian Express*. The story, *Time Travellers*, was written by Subhadra Sengupta. Two children, travelling through time from the present, found themselves in the Mughal past. The illustrator was working away, when he suddenly came to a stop. What the children had come upon was a woman sweeping the floor. The floor could be authentically depicted, as also the woman's dress. Details about Mughal architecture and Mughal costumes were abundantly available. But what about the Mughal *jhadu* or broom?

Tapas Guha tried to find out. But there seemed to be no information on the subject. What

did the brooms used in that period look like? He racked his brains. He could ofcourse have put in the kind of broom we are all familiar with. But that way, his mind would not be at peace. He finally took his query to the author whose idea it all was. Even Subhadra Sengupta had not visualized the broom she had put in her story in any detail, but she did offer some suggestions about improvising it, and Tapas Guha could carry on with his work.

So conscientious about his work, so caring! That is Tapas Guha all over.

A freelancer who illustrates both for adults and children (but enjoys the latter more), Guha has a very long array of work.

Apart from the Children's Book Trust, the publishing houses Tapas Guha has illustrated for include Rupa, Penguin, Puffin, Frank Educational Aids, Ratna Sagar, Vikas and National Book Trust. Mention must also be made of the book, *Workers at Ten*, edited by Rosalind Wilson, and the *Limca Book of Records*.

Among the magazines and newspapers Tapas Guha has illustrated for, are *Target*, *Namaste*, *World Wildlife Quarterly*, *Eves*, *Indian Express*, *Times of India*, *Tamasha*, *Swagat* and *Tan* (published in the U.K.).

Guha also works (but very selectively) for advertising agencies like *Madhyam*, for example.

Apart from illustrations and comic strips, Guha has several logos to his credit. For example, the logo to the theme "Words and Colours go Together" that was used on the poster brought out by the AWIC on the occasion of the International Children's Book Fair in 1992, and on the cover of the catalogue, *INDIAN ILLUSTRATORS 1960-1992*, published by AWIC.

Sipping tea in his tastefully yet warmly arranged sitting room, I asked him how the multi-coloured peacock of this logo, so familiar to AWIC members and known internationally as well, has evolved. Guha recalled that it was to show that creativity is free, that he had thought of drawing a bird. Then had come the idea of drawing a peacock, our national bird. Once he had the peacock before him 'graphically', he filled out its parts with letters of different shades, from the scripts of different Indian languages.

Guha is equally at ease with illustrations *per se*, and comic strips. But, I asked, was there any crucial difference in an approach to them? "In the case of a book illustration, you have to choose a few dramatic situations, some more and some less dramatic ones, and space them evenly. You can't take two successive ones, even if both of them happen to be dramatic," was his reply.

What are his preferences among the litera-

ture he illustrates? Guha said that he preferred to illustrate cheerful rather than pathetic scenes, and certainly would not like to illustrate a story with a gloomy outlook. He has illustrated classics and stories of human interest like *The Room On The Roof* and *Vagrants In The Valley* by Ruskin Bond, *A Moment Of Truth* by Sigrun Srivastava and *Good Girls Are Bad News* by Subhadra Sengupta, but prefers adventures and action-oriented works like *Shatar* by Monisha Mukundan and *The House Of Pigeons* by Subhadra Sengupta.

Guha's illustrations do have a degree of stylization, but overall his style is realistic. He feels that too much of stylization makes it difficult for children to visualize what the book describes. "If one keeps illustrations more or less realistic, it helps the readers," said Guha. Those who go in for a lot of stylization in their illustrations, do not, Guha felt, have the readers so much in mind but their own tastes and fancies. "There may be some amount of ego involved as well. After a point, the stylization becomes an identity.. so that the people can understand at once whose illustration it is." The illustrator feels it is more important for him to sign his pieces, and loses sight of the readers for whom, after all, the pieces are meant.

But Guha tries to keep his readers in mind when he works. This is why, he takes care to use "different styles for different books." Even when illustrating books belonging to the same series. For example, in the *Madhuban Abridged Classics* from Vikas which he illustrated almost 90 per cent, he "changed his style a little from book to book so that all the books would not seem the same to the children and so become boring for them."

Guha prefers to illustrate those stories which give some details about the personal appearances of the characters, but not so many that the illustrator feels dictated to. "There should be some freedom in this respect," he feels.

Illustrator Edmund Dulac is a "kind of ideal" with Guha and among Indian illustrators, he has

the greatest admiration for Abanindranath Tagore, Upendrakishore Roychowdhuri, Sukumar Roy, Satyajit Roy and Pinaki Dasgupta. His "favourite" comic strip is *Tintin*, and he has always felt that he would like to do something as good as Herge had done with *Tintin*. But, at the same time, Guha feels that every illustrator has to develop his own style.

How did it all begin for Guha? He told me that the first time he had illustrated, was for his own science fiction, *Roop and the Aliens from Space* in the *Children's World* in the early '80s. Guha had thus started out as a writer. He still has plans of writing "serious stuff."

Even earlier, when at school, he had participated in painting competitions, winning a medal at one of the Shankar's on-the-spot painting competitions. He started on oil painting when he was not yet in his teens. It was much later, when he took up illustrating as a profession, that he started on water colour and line drawing. Earlier still, when he had first begun, his mother recollects that Guha had been very fond of figures of gods and goddesses, especially the goddess Durga. In his teens, Guha became fascinated by movies and slowly turned to comic strips.

Guha has never received formal training in art. Beyond his school years, of course. He passed out from Raisina School, Delhi, with Commerce as his stream, and it was in Commerce that he obtained his B.Com. and M.Com. degrees from Zakir Hussain College and South Delhi Campus, University of Delhi. But Guha had done all this because it had been felt in the family that one had to go through a certain course of education. His art teacher at school had wanted him to take up art as his main subject, and Guha himself had never much of an interest in commerce.

So eventually, instead of becoming a marketing executive or chartered accountant, he became an illustrator by profession, with a dream that some day, he would have an exhibition of his own 'original' works of art.

This led me to ask, "Is book illustration not 'art'? Why are illustrators called 'illustrators' rather than artists?"

"I don't know why people do that," said Tapas Guha. The only difference, he felt, was that in illustrations the scale of work is physically much smaller, although that only makes the task more challenging. Guha felt that there are some book illustrators who are better than the so-called artists. Good book illustrators can be successful artists, not so much the other way round, though there are exceptions like Ganesh Pyne and Bikash Bhattacharya."

Guha felt that illustrators had been getting quite a lot of recognition in recent years, but that more is due. Even now, "most people flip through magazines and books and take pictures for granted. Nobody looks into the details. They feel that if books are there, then of course, illustrations too are there..." I could see his point. Illustrations can be invested with literary understanding and human empathization. One just has to look into the eyes of the boy in *A Moment of Truth* (p 44) to realize this. Illustrations can involve a knowledge of graphics and textures, movement and colour. The cover of *The Mystery of the House of Pigeons* is one example of this. And sometimes, apart from sensitivity or artistry, a lot of research can go into the illustration, as in the case of the comic strip, *Shabbir's Not-so-magic Carpet* written by Subhadra Sengupta, in the book *Workers at Ten*, edited by Rosalind Wilson and published by the Declaration of Berne, Orcades, Oxfam Worldshops, Abele Group and the Anti Slavery Society. For this Tapas Guha and Subhadra Sengupta went down to U.P., interviewed child labourers in the carpet weaving industry there, took their photographs, developed the story, and then came the final, the comic strip.

So perhaps libraries should catalogue books not merely according to authors, but according to illustrators as well. That is, adopt a two-way

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classification. And there should be more publications like *INDIAN ILLUSTRATORS 1960-1992* published by AWIC or *The Art Director Index to Illustrators* (brought out by Rotovision SA, Switzerland).

What are Guha's other interests, I probed. He used to play cricket and football in school. He likes light music, Indian and Western, and Salil Chowdhuri is his favourite music director. He is fond of knick-knacks and picks them up when something catches his fancy. "When I get the time, I get the furniture and knick-knacks in the rooms shifted from here to there, says the artist in him. The artist who likes to change his style from book to book.

What are his tastes in literature? Guha told me that he enjoys P.G. Wodehouse and James Hadley Chase, and also has an interest in heavier stuff like *Mysteries of the Unexplained* (Readers' Digest). As for science fiction, he felt that "Really good science fiction is not being written in India. There has really been just one science fiction writer of real calibre — Satyajit Ray, the creator of Professor Shanku."

What about ghost stories? Guha likes them, especially those which are presented as a humorous piece, like *Canterville Ghost* by Oscar Wilde. Ghost stories, Guha feels, should not be such that they lead to children being scared, but nor should they go to the other extreme and try to explain everything away, so that the sense of mystery is

gone. Ghost stories by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyaya and Satyajit Ray, pass these two tests and so Guha has a preference for them.

Adventures? Yes, of course, and here Guha mentioned an author who, outside West Bengal, is hardly known for his tales of adventure. Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya, internationally renowned because of *Pather Panchali* and *Aparjito*. His *Chander Pahar*, set in the deserts of Africa, is an adventure classic in Bengali.

Apart from adventure and action, Guha appreciates humour. In fact, when he takes up a collection, say, an annual, he reads "the funny stories first."

Perhaps more significant than what kind of fiction Guha likes, science fiction, adventure tales or ghost stories, is the fact that he just "loves reading children's literature." He was not referring merely to the words that he has to read in order to illustrate them. Quite apart from this, he regularly reads *Anadamela* and *Sandesh*, two well-known children's magazines in Bengali.

But what about the feeling that children's literature is, after all, something that its readers grow out of, and therefore, discard? Guha felt that "It depends on your mind. If your mind is fresh and uncluttered, you like reading children's books even after becoming an adult."

And you also like going back to the illustrations in them, I felt like adding. Especially if the illustrations are by one such as Tapas Guha.

Illustration is a visual language that can be understood by everybody.

-Tormod Haugen